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Ellis William Hudson

The Story
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Nana-bo-zhoo and His Brother;

An Indian Legend

By PE-AH-BE-WASH (Dr. W. H. Ellis)
(gradually falling snow)



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From the Christmas Varsity, 1888

The Story of
Nana-bo-zhoo
and his Brother



THE STORY OF NANA-BO-ZHOO AND HIS BROTHER

WE had done a good day's work at paddle and portage, but we had got early into camp, we had supped, nor had the toothsome trout been wanting at our meal, and now we sat or sprawled round the fire in that condition of utter contentment which is only made possible in this world by the combination of tired muscles and hunger appeased. For awhile we were satisfied to let the digestive processes proceed undisturbed, but presently the Old Woodsman rose from his seat, filled his pipe from some one else's pouch, for he was too old a hand to carry cut tobacco himself, lit it with a hot coal from the embers, and turning to the old Ojibway, our tried companion on many journeyings by lake and rivers, said, "John, some of us have never heard the story of Nana-bo-zhoo. Let us have it to-night."

John, who was known among his own people by the, to us, less hackneyed name of Ozhahwashkogezhik, was pleased to signify his assent, and seated himself on a log in a convenient posture for narration while the rest of us filled our pipes afresh and having bestowed ourselves in various attitudes which, if not graceful were at least unconventional, we all kept silence together, and intently held our faces.

The story that follows has often been told, but I have never seen it exactly as he gave it, and I have tried to write it here as nearly as possible as it was spoken. But the tones and gestures of the old savage, for a savage he was again for the time while he repeated the ancient epic of his people, the solemn grandeur of the pine woods, the delicate play of the moonbeams on the rippling water, the sighing of the summer wind among the branches, and the musical murmur of the rapid, all these which formed such an exquisitely fitting background to the story—how shall I convey the least shadow of it all? To those who know and love the woods, and to know them is to love them, no words of mine will be needed. Fancy led by memory can conjure up the scene, and hope will whisper, "When the summer comes."

I.

A long time ago there was an old man called Nana-bo-zhoo. He lived with his brother in a big wigwam. His brother was a great hunter, and Nana-bo-zhoo was a great hand to dress skins and furs. They had plenty of fur blankets and coats and the wigwam was hung all round with fur. Nana-bo-zhoo's brother had a bow and arrow and he could hit a bird or a beast as far off as he could see him, but he was such a good runner that he often used to run down the animals that he hunted, even the best runners, like deer and foxes, and kill them with a club. 'By and by the beasts got afraid they would all get killed; so they held a big council to try and find some way to stop Nana-bo-zhoo's brother from hunting them all down. At this council they agreed that the white reindeer could run the fastest of all the beasts, and so they chose him to decoy Nana-bo-zhoo's brother out on a lake, and the sea lion promised that when he got there he would make a noise like thunder and break the ice and drown Nana-bo-zhoo's brother in the lake.

So one day when the snow was deep Nana-bo-zhoo took a walk along the path that led from the wigwam into the wood. Pretty soon he saw the white reindeer standing near the path. Nana-bo-zhoo thought he had never seen such a fine reindeer before, and he went back very quietly to the wigwam and said to his brother, "Come out as quick as you can; there is the most beautiful white reindeer you ever saw standing beside the path. I want you to get him for me, but don't take your bow and arrow, take your club and run him down, so as not to spoil his hide." So Nana-bo-zhoo's brother took his club and went along the path very quietly, and before long he saw the white reindeer feeding beside the path. The white reindeer didn't take any notice of Nana-bo-zhoo's brother, but went on feeding while he crept nearer and nearer, but at last when he was quite near he trod on a dry branch that was under the snow, the branch cracked and the white reindeer held up his head, threw up his tail and went off with three big jumps. Nana-bo-zhoo's brother ran after him, but though he could run so fast the white reindeer could run just as fast as he, and all day long he kept just ahead of him. Sometimes Nana-bo-zhoo's brother would gain a little bit on the reindeer, but always just when he got so near that he thought he could almost hit him with his club, the white reindeer would give a big jump, and get as far ahead as ever.

II.

When night came and his brother did not come back, Nana-bo-zhoo said, "That white reindeer has led my brother a long chase. It is too far for him to carry the deer back to the wigwam before dark. He has camped somewhere till the morning. To-morrow he will come back with the meat and the hide." So he cooked his supper, and rolled himself in his blanket and went to sleep. But next day his brother did not come back, nor the day after, nor the day after that, so Nana-bo-zhoo said, "Something must have happened to my brother, I must go and look for him." So he took his brother's bow and arrows and set out. He followed his brother's tracks as far as the lake, but there a snowstorm came on and covered the tracks up. Then the spring came and the ice and snow melted, but Nana-bo-zhoo heard nothing of his brother. At last one day he was walking along the lake shore when he saw the kingfisher sitting on a leaning tree looking into the water. "What are you looking at, kingfisher?" said Nana-bo-zhoo. "Oh, nothing," said the kingfisher, "I am just watching to see if I can catch a fish for my breakfast." "I know better," said Nana-bo-zhoo, "You're looking at something down there in the water. You tell me what you're looking at and I'll paint your feathers for you, and give you pretty colours." Now the kingfisher used to be an ugly bird with ugly gray feathers all one colour, so he said, "All right! I'll tell you what I'm looking at. I'm watching the sea-lions playing with Nana-bo-zhoo's brother." So Nana-bo-zhoo painted his feathers and made him pretty colours like you see him now. Then Nana-bo-zhoo asked him how he could get his brother from the sea-lions, but the kingfisher said he could not tell him. Now, the kingfisher had no tuft on his head then, so Nana-bo-zhoo said to him, "If you will tell me I will give you a tuft of feathers on your head." "All right," said the kingfisher, "You go along the lake shore till you come to a nice sand beach and if it is a calm day you will see the water boiling where the sea lions are playing under the water. On fine days they come out of the water a little before noon to sun themselves on the sand. Wait there and you'll see them." So Nana-bo-zhoo gave the kingfisher a tuft of feathers on his head, like you see him now.

III.

After Nana-bo-zhoo left the kingfisher he walked along the lake shore till he came to a nice sand beach. It was a calm hot day and there was no ripple on the lake, but while Nana-bo-zhoo looked at the water it began to boil just as the kingfisher had said, so Nana-bo-zhoo changed himself into an old stump and waited to see what would happen.

Pretty soon the sea lions came ashore. The first two were as white as milk. These were the chiefs. The other sea lions were as red as blood. When they came out of the water they began to play about on the sand, but by and by one of the white sea lions caught sight of the old stump. He stopped playing and called out to the others "I never saw that stump before, that must be Nana-bo-zhoo; it's just like one of the old fellow's tricks!" But the other white sea lion said, "Oh, nonsense; that stump was always there, I remember that stump quite well." Some of the red sea-lions thought the stump had been there before, and others thought it had not; and there was a great dispute among them about it. At last the white sea-lion said, "Let us all take hold of the stump and try to pull it over. If it is Nana-bo-zhoo we shall easily throw him down, but if it is really a stump we shall not be able to move it." "All right," cried the sea-lions, and they all took hold of the stump and pulled and tugged with all their might to try and pull it over. They pulled so hard that Nana-bo-zhoo could hardly stand against them. But he put out all his magic, and made his roots go down deep into the ground so that the sea-lions could not stir him. When they found that they could not move the stump they left off pulling and said, "This is not Nana-bo-zhoo, this is only an old stump"; and they lay down on the sand, and because they were all tired with pulling so hard they soon all fell fast asleep. Then Nana-bo-zhoo changed himself back into a man, took his bow and shot the biggest sea lion with one of the arrows. The wounded sea-lion made such a noise that the others woke up and they all ran together into the lake and made a great boiling in the water as they dived out of sight.

IV.

After the sea lions had gone, Nana-bo-zhoo walked along the lake shore and pretty soon he met a big toad with a club in his hand and a bag over his shoulder who was walking along the shore singing

"I am a big medicine man,
I have power over all the world."

"Where are you going, toad?" said Nana-bo-zhoo. "Oh," said the toad, "I'm going under the lake to cure the white sea lion that Nana-bo-zhoo wounded." "What have you got in your bag?" "That's my medicine to cure the sea lion." Then Nana-bo-zhoo took his other arrow and shot the

toad dead, and he put on the toad's skin and made himself a toad, and took the toad's club in his hand and threw his bag over his shoulder and went along singing:

"I am a big medicine man,
I have power over all the world."

Then he went into the lake and dived down to the bottom, and walked along till he came to a door. He looked through the door and inside he saw the sea lions playing about on the bottom of the lake. So he went in singing:

"I am a big medicine man,
I have power over all the world."

"What do you want?" said the sea lions. "I've come to cure your chief that Nana-bo-zhoo wounded," said Nana-bo-zhoo. "All right," said the sea lions, and they led him to another door into another room where the sick sea lion was lying. But when they opened the door Nana-bo-zhoo saw his brother hung across the doorway. He said nothing to his brother and his brother said nothing to him, but he went up to the sick sea lion, singing:

"I am a big medicine man,
I have power over all the world."

Then all the sea lions crowded into the room, but Nana-bo-zhoo said to them, "If you want me to cure this sick man you must leave me alone with him, for my medicine will not work unless I am alone." So the sea lions all went out and shut the door, and then Nana-bo-zhoo killed the white sea lion with his club, and took down his brother from the door and ran with him in his arms for the shore. When the sea lions found out what he had done they all chased him, but Nana-bo-zhoo got out of the water before they caught him, set down his brother on the beach, took him by the hand and they both ran as fast as they could away from the lake. For when the sea lions got to the edge of the lake they made the water rise and follow them as they ran after Nana-bo-zhoo and his brother. So Nana-bo-zhoo and his brother kept running further inland, and the sea lions kept following them and the water followed the sea lions; and all the birds and beasts ran before the water along with Nana-bo-zhoo and his brother. At last they got to the top of the highest mountain, and the water followed them there. So Nana-bo-zhoo built a raft and he and his brother and all the animals got on to the raft and the water rose above the top of the mountain and the raft floated off with them.

After awhile Nana-bo-zhoo called for the best divers to come to him. These were the beaver, the otter, the loon and the muskrat. So Nana-bo-zhoo said to them. "Which of you good divers will go down and find bottom? The beaver said he would go, so he jumped into the water and swam round and round, saying, "Umph, umph, umph," and then dived. He was down so long that when he came up again he was drowned, dead. Poor beaver! Nana-bo-zhoo took him on the raft, blew into his mouth, and made him alive again. Then he said to the otter; "Otter, will you try if you can find bottom?" "All right," said the otter, and jumped into the water, and swam round and round, saying, "When, when, when," and then dived. He was a long time under water, longer than the beaver, but at last he came up again, drowned, dead. Poor otter! Nana-bo-zhoo took him on the raft, blew into his mouth, and made him alive again. Then he said to the loon; "Loon, will you try if you can find bottom?" "All right," said the loon, and he jumped into the water and swam round and round, saying, "Ha ha! ha ha! ha ha!" and then dived. He was a long time under water, longer than the otter, but at last he came up again, drowned, dead. Poor loon! Nana-bo-zhoo took him on the raft, blew into his mouth and made him alive again. Then he said to the muskrat; "Muskrat, you see how all these good divers have failed, will you try?" And the little muskrat said, "I don't pretend to be a good diver like the beaver or the otter or the loon, but I will try." So he jumped into the water and swam round and round, saying, "St, st, st," and dived. He was a long time under water, longer than the loon, and when he came up again he was drowned, dead. Poor muskrat! Nana-bo-zhoo took him on the raft and saw that his two fore paws were clasped together. So he unclasped them and found a little mud held between the paws. Nana-bo-zhoo took the mud from his paws and then blew in his mouth and made him alive again. Then he petted the muskrat and praised him, and the little muskrat was so proud that he had got to the bottom when all the good divers failed that he wanted to go down and get some more mud. But Nana-bo-zhoo said there was plenty, and he took it and rubbed it between his hands till it was like fine flour; then he threw it on the water. It was a calm day and the dust spread out all over the water and covered it; and Nana-bo-zhoo drew on it with his finger the lakes and rivers and islands and mountains and valleys and everything just as you see it now. That is the way the world was made.

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